

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on HR 1739 and HR 2149
Guy Holmes
Wilderness Disability Project
Before the
House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
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Hello, my name is Guy Holmes. I would like to thank the House Committee. I come before you with great respect and honor.

I am the founder of the Wilderness Disability Project whose goals are to reestablish access for the disabled into the B.W.C.A.W. I am a nurse who has specialized in the area of rehabilitation and have been involved with the rights of the disabled most of my life. My experience ranges from clinical to outdoor recreational settings. I also have an extensive background in emergency medical care.

More important than who I am, is the reason and purpose for my being here. The matter of B.W.C.A.W. access is of paramount importance to the people I represent. The present system without truck portages amounts to outright discrimination. There are over 40 million physically challenged people with various degrees of disability in the United States, many of whom would like to enjoy the splendor and beauty of the B.W.C.A.; many of whom will never get that opportunity without the reintroduction of the three truck portages. Can you picture in your minds a person in a wheelchair with a canoe on his or her shoulders trying to balance and propel at the same time? Can you picture that same person with straps connected to the back of his or her wheelchair pulling a fishing boat loaded with gear? The answer is clear. No, of course you can't. How about our senior citizens? Many of whom have toiled a lifetime of work hoping to enjoy their retirement. Old injuries like weak backs, bum knees, a little arthritis, or an aged heart become increasingly evident while trying to pull a 16 foot fishing boat loaded with gear! There are no emergency services available on the portages. I ask you, do we really have to wait until we experience a heart attack death before we can act and do the right thing by returning the three truck portages?

Another example would be that of a grandfather and grandson. Grandpa always wished to show his grandson some of the old fishing holes that were good to him in his early years; maybe even show his grandson where his cabin was before the B.W.C.A. took it away. Certainly this would not be possible without the help of three to four healthy young men to pull the gear-laden fishing boat across the portage.

The American Family has been further compromised by the truck portage closures. Society's pressure has had a great toll on the traditional family unit. We need to find ways to preserve the cultures and traditions of the family experience, not further degrade it. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for today's families to portage a fully loaded fishing boat. That impossibility extends to the ever increasing single parent families in today's society.

Of course, we know that disabled people can't be expected to carry a canoe or pull a fishing boat, for many

of them it takes a monumental effort to get themselves across. In my experience with the disabled, I have found that they do accept help from others. They strive for as much independence as is possible to attain--independence they once had when the truck portages were in operation. We are supposed to be living in an age where we feel compassion and understanding for the less fortunate. We are supposed to be increasing access, not decreasing it!

Congressmen, today you will hear testimony from others claiming that they do have disability access with the help of others or organizations that will take them. The problem is that these organizations don't offer boating B.W.C.A. trips, and their prices are quite expensive. For them to come before you and claim that they can fulfill the needs of the disabled community is very self-serving. Many of the disabled people I have worked with do not feel secure in a canoe, and their only safe alternative is in a fishing boat. For them, getting to a lake like Trout or Basswood in a boat is their wilderness experience

There are over 1,100--I repeat--1,100 lakes in the B.W.C.A.W. that are canoe only. We are talking about access to only two of them connecting one motorized lake to another legally authorized motor lake within the B.W.C.A. Allowing the return of the three truck portages would not be a threat to the environment. The truck portages were in operation for decades with no harm. This is not an environmental issue, it's an access issue. Please remember this!

When Federal mediation was first proposed, several groups refused to take part citing mistrust of the entire process. This opinion is not without foundation. I tried to be a part of the mediation panel but was denied access. Does this statement sound familiar? Any legislation proposed on the basis that this mediation panel was the consensus of all concerned parties goes beyond misinformation, it would be a tragic lie!

Why were the 'powers that be' so afraid of what I might say? Did they think by keeping me off the mediation panel that my message would not be heard? That is why I am here today--to make sure my message is heard. This message is being heard all across America.

I would like to quote from Senator Wellstone's press release of July 29, 1997 regarding B.W.C.A.W. legislation. "These compromises created a situation unique in the entire federal wilderness system, with certain motor uses retained in key areas of the wilderness. These compromises and promises which accompanied them, were linchpins which enabled the B.W.C.A.W. Act to become law. Without them, the B.W.C.A.W. would not have been created."

The late great Senator and Vice-President Hubert Humphrey must be turning in his grave over what we have done! He stated that access for Northern Minnesotans would not be denied. Well, I feel Hubert Humphrey's presence in this room--right beside me--right beside you.

This is now your chance to end the discrimination and help our citizens regain the faith in our government. Show your support for the B.W.C.A.W. Fairness and Accessibility Act of 1997. You can do the right thing. Thank you.

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